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SUBJECT: TOGOLESE REFUGEES IN GHANA NEARLY TWO YEARS ON

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Nearly two years after Togolese refugees streamed across the Ghana border following post-election violence, the number of refugees repatriating to Togo has slowed, even though their situation in Ghana has become somewhat less attractive. Food rations for half of them have stopped flowing, while some Ghanaians are showing signs of "refugee fatigue." For its part, the GOG is not pressuring anyone to leave, nor will it likely encourage repatriation until it is convinced that conditions are right. The conduct of the June legislative elections in Togo will probably determine whether the GOG and UNHCR will launch a more intensified campaign in cooperation with the GOT to encourage the Togolese refugees' repatriation. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ref Coord traveled with AF/W Desk Officer Emily Plumb to the Volta Region on January 22 for a meeting with UNHCR Head of Field Office Anicet Ndayisaba and for a visit to Togolese refugees in the village of Penyi. Joining them were Needa Jehu-Hoyah, UNHCR Public Information Officer, and M. Ajith Sunghay, UNHCR Associate Protection Officer.

Repatriation Slowing

¶3. (SBU) According to the UNHCR Field Office, there has been only a small decrease in the estimated 10,000 refugees in Ghana since its May 2006 headcount (6,000 of these came in the 2005 exodus, while 4,000 of these are Togolese who fled during the 1990s and are less likely to repatriate). The GOT continues to push for a tri-partite agreement that would launch the UNHCR-assisted phase of repatriation, but both UNHCR headquarters in Geneva and the GOG believe the time is not yet right. According to Ndayisaba, the head of the GOT's repatriation effort is an old Eyadema family stalwart whom refugees distrust. He opined that a more moderate figure would encourage a greater number of refugees to return home. He noted that some 1,500 refugees had repatriated from Benin over the past six months with UNHCR assistance, while only a handful had signed up in Ghana. Although there were no reports of harassment, Ndayisaba had heard that many of the returnees had trouble re-integrating in Togo because they had difficulty finding employment.

Largesse Decreasing

¶4. (U) Beginning on January 1, UNHCR reduced food rations, providing full rations to only 3,000 of the most vulnerable Togolese in Ghana. The other refugees, including the 4,000 who fled Togo during the 1990's, receive nothing. Ndayisaba acknowledged the less-than-ideal timing, since the first harvest for those engaged in agricultural projects will not be ready until March. Nonetheless, UNHCR had agreed with the World Food Program to reduce food rations in 2007, forcing his office to reduce outlays. In response, one refugee attempted to organize a peaceful protest, but the overall reaction has been muted.

Possible Resettlement Cases

¶15. (SBU) UNHCR mentioned several medical cases and noted that others who had been heavily involved in politics would not likely return to Togo. Ref Coord encouraged Ndayisaba to consult with UNHCR's hub and to refer those families for whom resettlement was the best durable solution. In terms of medical care, GOG hospitals and clinics in the Volta Region remain available for the refugees to use at no charge, although the Togolese have to arrange their own transportation and often purchase medicine if it is not available inside the government facility.

Meeting with Refugees in Penyi

¶16. (SBU) Ref Coord and AF/W Desk Officer proceeded to meet with refugees in the small village of Penyi, an isolated settlement located about 30 kilometers northwest of the Aflao/Lome border crossing. The 100 refugees living there were somewhat atypical in that they were younger than average and no refugees from the villages had yet repatriated. Otherwise, they represented a mix of Togolese from both urban and rural backgrounds. Women were involved in making cassava paste for sale, while some of the men found intermittent work as construction workers. Refugees reported an improved sense of security, with no suspicious visitors from east of the border since June 2006.

Some Signs of Refugee Fatigue

¶17. (SBU) Nearly two years after the refugee flows began, there was increasing evidence of "refugee fatigue" in the region. Some

ACCRA 00000294 002 OF 002

landlords have begun asking the Togolese to begin paying rent, including those living in cinderblock flats in Penyi. Other Ghanaian host families sharing quarters with refugees have suggested it may be time for them to leave. Those in Penyi said they were not yet ready to return, but would follow the June legislative elections in Togo closely. If there is neither violence nor chicanery, they said they would then consider returning home.

The View from Togo

¶18. (SBU) Embassy Lome has suggested that many refugees are reluctant to repatriate because they were involved in acts of violence and fear prosecution or retribution from their neighbors. During her stay in Togo, AF/W Desk Officer Plumb asked Georges Aidam, the Director of the Cabinet, about the refugees. He simply said the GOT's goal was to convince all of them to return voluntarily. He added that his wife, as Minister of Human Rights, was in charge of this effort. There appeared to be no special program to persuade the Togolese refugees to return prior to the upcoming legislative elections so that they could vote.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) The Togolese refugees in Ghana have more reason than ever to repatriate: an improving political climate in Togo, a sense that they may be wearing out their welcome, and a reduction in food rations. The Secretary of Ghana's Refugee Board told Ref Coord on January 24 that the GOG and UNHCR would probably join forces after Togo's legislative elections - if they proceed peacefully and without massive fraud - to launch a program of "assisted" repatriation. However, he said Ghana would first want assurances from the international community that conditions in Togo are suitable for returning refugees.

¶10. (U) This cable was cleared with AF/W Desk Officer Plumb and Embassy Lome.

